

# Speaking the Unnamable:

## A Phenomenology of Sense in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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*Through its ostensibly philosophical rhetoric and multiple allusions, Four Quartets manifests a continuity between Eliot's poetic thought and his early engagement with philosophy. The thematic core of this continuity is Eliot's concern with the meaningful experience of reality, described as equally dependent on direct perception and on linguistic structure: language shapes perception into a meaningful world-vision, while experience itself is an ongoing process of interpreting (or signifying) that which is perceived. This link empowers poetic language, entangling the reading consciousness in a process to which Husserl's descriptions of consciousness refer as "sense-giving." Four Quartets epitomizes both the phenomenological description and the poetic enactment of meaningful experience. Its opening movement both mimics the structure of experienced reality and keeps the reading eye in the process of making sense in its full complexity, involving all faculties of apprehending reality, from the metaphysical logo-centric systems underlying conceptual understanding of the world to the direct sensuous perception of immediate environment.*

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In our appreciation of Eliot's creative and critical writing, we can hardly avoid locating the piece we read in the narrative line of his intellectual biography, the general view of which is that Eliot began as a philosopher but gave up his academic training to write poetry and poetic drama. *Four Quartets* complicates this story: the last of Eliot's poetic sequences, and thus the culminating, most mature expression of his poetic sensibility, this poem sometimes reads as a tentatively versified philosophical treatise. Western and Eastern philosophy permeates its language and imagery, manifesting rather insistently that Eliot's philosophical past remained quite present even at the end of his poetic career, two decades after he formally left philosophy behind. Through such obvious contamination of his arguably most powerful poem with philosophical allusions and rhetoric, Eliot claims for his poetry the status of poetically shaped philosophical discourse.

If philosophy is thought of as the discourse of knowledge, and poetry as a discourse of experience, Eliot's concern with their mutual contamination can be traced back to his early years: the relationship between knowledge and experience is the central issue of his dissertation (*Knowledge and Experience*). *Four Quartets* rethinks this relationship in one of its self-reflective passages, defining it with a kind of precision that Eliot's philosophical writing cannot boast:

There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been.

(EC II, 179)<sup>1</sup>

Knowledge and experience are distinct yet interdependent. In his thesis, Eliot argues extensively that there is no other knowledge except the knowledge derived from experience (*Knowledge and Experience* passim, esp. 168-169). Here, letting the nominal phrase “the knowledge derived from experience” stand by itself, he silently leaves the alternative possibility open, elaborating on the value of the knowledge derived from experience only. The value of knowledge is limited because its “pattern” is wrong: inadequate to the pattern of experience from which the knowledge is derived. This is because knowledge is belated by definition: experience does not wait to be conceptualized in the terms of knowledge but moves unstoppably forward in time, and so the pattern of given experience—“*the pattern*”—“is new in every moment.” And yet, it is “*the pattern*” that renews itself. Through the shared ground of patterning, knowledge is inscribed in experience itself, clearly enough to give experience the authority of valuation: “the pattern is new in every moment,” and this constantly flowing pattern contains within it as a given the undoubtable—even though discovered as “new and shocking”—knowledge “of all we have been” in a moment of unsought self-reflection.

Defining knowledge and experience against each other, Eliot is concerned with the core issue of phenomenology, the question of meaningful experience, and he describes it in what amounts to a comprehensively phenomenological frame of reference even though in somewhat different terms. Experience is the given ground of existence, and it is given as meaningful: the world somehow always already makes sense to us. This intuited meaningfulness is in-formed by knowledge—embedded in the terms of that which we know—but it must not be confused with the conceptual order in which knowledge operates, inevitably imposing its terminological order on the reality it aims to explain. And so Eliot, like phenomenological thinkers of his time and after, is balancing on the precipice of the unnamable: there are no other means to understand and speak except in conceptual systems, and yet one needs to keep one's eye on that which is something other than the terms one uses seem to say. For Edmund Husserl, this tension is the basic human condition and the driving force of the conscious experience of the world, this experience in its turn understood as an ongoing effort of making sense.

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In the setting of Eliot's philosophical backgrounds, phenomenology is a somewhat ghostly presence. Some critics of Eliot have observed a terminological correspondence between Eliot's “objective correlative” and Husserl's “*objectives Korrelat*” while shying away from the implication of a conceptual identity suggested by this correspondence (Steadman; Maxwell). Others have noted parallels between the premises of Eliot's theoretical writing and those of Husserl while drawing them through mediatory contexts

rather than actually juxtaposing Eliot and Husserl<sup>2</sup>: phenomenological assumptions underpin Eliot's philosophical thought and his artistic sensibility in a similar way as it did for Sartre (Freed 96, 126; Perl 128), but directly Husserl's significance is restricted to another presence next to Nietzsche (Habib, *The Earle T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* 152), Bergson, Dilthey, and other "new realists" (Schwartz, *The New Matrix of Modernism* 46, 172-173; "Beyond the 'Objective Correlative'" 325-326). Jitendra Kumar highlights a network of compatibilities between Eliot and phenomenological thinkers beyond Husserl including Brentano, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; and yet this network seems too fragmentary to attempt a conclusion about the significance of phenomenological premises to our understanding of Eliot. Harriet Davidson and William Spanos read Eliot's poetry as expressing a phenomenological world-view in effect even if the historical links between Eliot and phenomenology are indirect; but for the terms of interpretation these studies do not refer to Husserl, drawing instead on Heidegger, the figure of the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology specifically and in Western philosophy at large.<sup>3</sup> A sense of the indeterminate half-presence of Husserl in Eliot's thinking is strong enough for Donald Childs (39) to suggest that there might be a similarity, worth separate investigation, between Eliot's relation to Husserl and that of Derrida.

Historically, the analogy Childs draws does not quite hold. Eliot indeed read *Logical Investigations* in the original German in 1914, but his doctoral thesis submitted within nineteenth months does not contain a single reference to Husserl.<sup>4</sup> Even if it did, Eliot and Derrida deal with different versions of Husserl: Derrida grapples with Husserl as the founder of phenomenology, facing the task of distinguishing a set of independent terms from an established dogma, while Eliot is "plugging away at Hüsserl" as a contemporary philosopher, whom he eventually leaves alone when he elaborates his conception of "The Nature of Objects" in more readily productive terminological frames, predominantly against F. H. Bradley (Eliot and Haughton 65, 147). And yet this difference of Husserl's role in the intellectual biographies of Eliot and Derrida does not annul a structural similarity. Like Derrida, Eliot here appears as an independent thinker, elaborating a philosophical vision of his own rather than being a mere commentator on an established philosopher. And, again like Derrida, Eliot presents a philosophical vision that is phenomenological at its core. Without adhering to a doctrinal version of Husserl comprehensively, Eliot raises concerns that are central in Husserl, articulating them in contiguous and yet independently conceived terms that both challenge and extend the framework of Husserl's phenomenology in a quite Derridean manner.

This non-derivative affinity between Eliot and Husserl seems to result from the fact that they were responding to the same tensions determining the intellectual climate of the day. These tensions focused on the issue of objectivity, as the philosophical discourse of the time questioned the givenness of the subject-object distinction against the background of a growing awareness that all distinctions are instated linguistically. In Eliot, the degree of this awareness is quite extreme. *Knowledge and Experience* builds a philosophical argument about objective reality on a radicalized version of Bradley's premise of immediate experience. Eliot refuses to follow Bradley in identifying immediate experience, or the "non-distinguished non-relational whole," with the Absolute but instead interprets Bradley's definition literally: for Eliot, immediate experience denotes the field of pre-linguistic irreducibly given (and in that sense originating) perception that turns into an environment of objects perceived by the subject; and because no object—not even the perceiving subject—exists until this pre-articulate field has broken into an environment of objects, immediate experience is the state of nothingness (29-31, 144-155). The two characteristics that distinguish actual experience, of objective reality, from the ideal state of immediate experience, define linguistic structure. And even though Saussurean definitions of language as a diacritical relational system were not available to Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience* presents an elaborate argument on an unmissable implication of Eliot's reading of Bradley: that this definition of experienced reality in linguistic terms merges the structure of reality

itself with the structure of language which articulates the meaning of that reality. Eliot thus conflates epistemology with ontology, and his dissertation in this light appears as a philosophical elaboration on the nature of this conflation and an insistence that every epistemological project must reflect on its implications and define the terms of inquiry accordingly. This demand punctuates Eliot's writing in all genres, which has won him the reputation of a skeptic, a commonplace in Eliot criticism.

Eliot's theoretical thought on the relationship between experienced reality and language as the prototype of signifying structure is a separate issue, while here I want to exploit the reverse side of the unbreakable interdependence between language and the real, as it underlies Eliot's poetic sensibility and empowers his poetic language. Eliot's statements that real existents appear as existents only through a process of signification also suggest that anything articulated in language is an existent of some kind: Ivanhoe, the present King of France, golden mountains, round squares and bogies are all real (*Knowledge and Experience* 32-56, 115-117). And even though Eliot qualifies this implication with an explanation as to why these existents are not quite real in every case, it is his poetry that shows what the fundamental qualification is. In Eliot's poetry—most assertively in *Four Quartets*—the power of language to instate reality is embedded in the structure of experience itself. This poem exploits and exposes the points of juncture between language and extra-linguistic experience in shaping a meaningful vision of the real. By exploiting these points of juncture, *Four Quartets* gains its aesthetic force; by exposing them, the poem works as a quintessentially phenomenological statement about the nature of experienced reality.

This double functioning of the poem's language is better seen through the prism of Husserl's terms rather than Eliot's own. Husserl does not allow for hypothetical originating versions of the pre-linguistic real for a linguistically organized reality of objects to have a perceptual basis. Instead, Husserl focuses on the process and event of articulation itself, comprehensively drawing on the dichotomy between the objective structure of reality as it appears to the human eye and the experience of apprehending reality in this way. To formulate the opposition in more ostensibly Husserlian terms, we are concerned here with the distinction between consciousness as the meaningful *structure* of the world it knows and consciousness as the *process* of understanding it by the means of such structure, and this complementary opposition is marked in Husserl by the terminological pair *noesis-noema*. *Noesis* marks the process and the mode of conscious awareness of the existents of reality, or the act and the process of experiencing; while *noema* refers to the object of this awareness, this object in its turn appearing as an element of the complex of the noematic meanings (or objects as they are apprehended) that constitute the vision of the world at a given moment. This dichotomy defines conscious experience of reality, which is the fundamental condition of human existence in the world. Consciousness is aware of reality as comprised of objects that appear to conscious view in a particular given mode and thus constitute a meaningful vision of that which consciousness perceives. *Noesis* marks the fact that consciousness intends to see that which it perceives as meaningful entities, or objects; but this act of intending—an intentional act—by definition assumes an object intended: awareness is not experienced by itself but is always *of* something—of *noema*, which is the objective structure of the field of awareness that consciousness inherently assumes. This is one of many Husserlian definitions of intentionality.

The relationship between intentionality and language calls for a far more extended commentary than my present discussion can afford. For my present purposes—in the light of Eliot's premises outlined above and assuming that Husserl allows for such interpretation,—I propose to identify the structural (*noematic*) plane of consciousness with linguistic structure, and the experiential (*noetic*) process with the act of reading located in—or, rather, enacted by—the reading consciousness. Thought of as the basic scheme of poetic communication within which Eliot writes his poetry, the interpreting consciousness is not necessarily found *in a poem* (which is done most conventionally by projecting a narrative on it and then tracing its protagonist's journey) but is situated *in front of a poem*, facing the poem's text. The

methodological reduction that needs to be performed in order to carry out a reading on these terms is twofold: for either of these correlates of the Husserlian dichotomy, nothing beyond their phenomenological definitions given above can be assumed. All values perceived as the poem's meanings, that is, emerge from the mutually formative interaction between (1) the linguistic structure as a relational whole of significative units that articulate meaning and (2) the experience of meaning as the process in which meaning actually constitutes itself.

(1) As one of many Husserl's definitions of the phenomenological description goes, the primary methodological demand for it is "to follow up the clear essential data with an entire absence of all prejudice, and indifference to all current and borrowed theories" (*Ideas* 256). This does not mean that "prejudice" or "theories" have no role to play in shaping our experience of the world; but it means, rather, that if we want to see into the nature of experiencing itself, we must suspend—"bracket," that is—our beliefs articulated by those terms. For reading *Four Quartets*, I propose translating this demand into the imperative of suspending intertextuality for the sake of foregrounding the network of meaningful relations within the poem. The poem's "message"—in a very minimal sense, as that which it aims to communicate—lies in this network and must be discerned from it, while the interpretative value of the contexts alluded to comes after this inner network has been given its due. While *Four Quartets* (as, indeed, all Eliot's poetry) offers an overwhelmingly thick web of allusions across the full paradigm of discourses, from popular culture through religious texts to the pillars of Western philosophy and beyond, it is by creating a set of tensions on the plane of literal meaning that this poem gives us the experience it does. Aiming to foreground the poem's aesthetic structure in the course of my interpretation, I assume a hierarchy of perceptual and significative planes as follows: readerly perception and understanding of the poem's meanings is most immediately directed by the textual patterning of words on the page; through this textual ordering, the reading eye interprets the significative network of language as a grammatical and lexical system; and finally, conditioned by the relations that the textual and the linguistic planes of poetic expression set out, the poem's meanings are intensified and enriched by contexts to which they intertextually allude. While no actual reading experience follows this hierarchy, I am assuming here that every experience arises as a singular constellation of these perceptual and significative planes. By virtue of this hierarchy that a poem as a singular linguistic expression creates, we recognize its unique identity even though its effects and meanings might differ for us in every reading act.

(2) Once the Husserlian reduction is performed, the phenomenologist is left with the irreducible residue and the ultimate object of description: consciousness itself. Phenomenological consciousness is not the superstructure of reason over the chaos of the so-called psychic and bodily "sensations" that, when seen in a complex, combine into the self-sufficient entity of the psychological subject. This consciousness, instead, is the pure agency and medium of what Husserl repeatedly refers to as "sense-giving." Husserl emphasizes that "*all real unities are 'unities of meaning'*," and that "unities of meaning presuppose (let me repeat it with emphasis: not through deduction of metaphysical postulates of any description, but because we can point to it in our intuitive wholly doubt-free procedure) *a sense-giving consciousness*, which, on its side, is absolute and not dependent in its turn on sense bestowed on it from another source" (*Ideas* §55, 168). Consciousness intends meaningfulness in the field it apprehends; it "senses" meaning, so to say, in all that of which it is aware: its "essential nature is to conceal 'meaning' within itself" (*Ideas* §86, 251), and the ongoing activity of bestowing meaning on that which constantly falls into its view is its life. It is this phenomenological consciousness—as pure signifying energy—that is presupposed by a poem, the poem itself being a linguistically articulated expression of a unique way of experiencing the world which is one of those "real unities of meaning" that the sense-giving consciousness inherently intends.

While this dichotomy in itself is effective in the phenomenological approach to aesthetic communication in general, its application to reading *Four Quartets* does more than offer another interpretative perspective on the poem. Read with these premises in mind, *Four*

*Quartets* appears as a phenomenological description of the kind that no philosophical discourse can ever aspire to perform. For, by poetic means, through a singular network of repetitions and shifts and differences in the references of the poem's words, as well as through the grammatical and rhythmical and textual patterning of this poem, Eliot lays bare the very structure and dynamic of conscious experience while simultaneously keeping the reading consciousness in the tension of sense-giving without ever resolving it in a concept. *Four Quartets* replays the event of the birth of meaning in a variety of settings, in different geographical and biographical locations, in different discourses that operate on different levels of abstraction through a range of themes, in a sequence punctuated by lines of self-reflection. Yet ultimately, on the overarching level on which the poem would be expected to articulate the meaning of its own, such articulation does not happen: the poem's meaning—as a meaning—is never named. The wondrous duality and unity of conscious existence that Husserl marks by the dichotomy of consciousness as both the structure and the processual mode of experiencing Eliot exposes and then leaves open—as it always is in the existential experience of making sense of the reality we live.

Rather directly, through its imagery, the poem asserts this openness in its closing image, insistently metaphorical and unnamable in a single concept: a compound oneness of the fire and the rose.<sup>5</sup> But it is the opening movement of the poem that I will read below. By virtue of its function of setting out, so to speak, the rules of the game that the rest of the poem is to play, the opening is the most straightforward and densest articulation of the structure that *Four Quartets* re-instates in a sequence of its poetic meditations. It presents an epiphanic vision of the roses, one of the two constituents of the poem's closing image, weaving into this narrative a range of motifs re-played throughout the poem itself and recurrent in Eliot's writing beyond *Four Quartets*. Most importantly for my expository discussion here, this concise poetic narrative both thematises and exploits the significative-aesthetic structure of the perception of the world in its full complexity, laying bare the nature of signifying mediation: it tells about and simultaneously performs the process in which language and perception are unbreakably intertwined and yet distinct. *Four Quartets* more extensively, and "Burnt Norton" I in a very focused way, give us an opportunity to see and experience how these simultaneously given existential planes—the gifts of linguistic and sensuous awareness—turn reality into the lived world.

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*Four Quartets* greets its reader with a series of paratextual riddles, immediately entangling the reading eye in an active (re-)construction of hypothetical frames of meaningfulness in which those riddles would possibly make sense. The overarching title has no obvious semantic force except for pointing to a principle of musical (or, to generalize a step further, aesthetic) organisation, while the section titles are place names, indicating no clear relation to the poem's title. The title "Burnt Norton" comes before the epigraph: with no epigraphs to follow (with the exception of the parenthetical note to "The Dry Salvages," whose explanatory function is unambiguously clear), it comes to preface the entire sequence; but if so, it appears in the wrong place. Yet the epigraph, whether it is considered as a comment on "Burnt Norton" or on *Four Quartets*, does not quite comment on anything, for Eliot gives it in Greek without translation or transcription but only with a reference (in yet another language, for it cites a German translation from which Eliot quotes) and the name, "Herakleitos."<sup>6</sup> Another break follows, the Roman numeral marking the first movement of the first section, and only then the poem begins to speak. By this time the reading eye has encountered enough screens withholding meaning to treat every meaning it thinks it gets with care if not suspicion.

Such care is much needed, for the poem's main text opens with a sequence of false repetitions.

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future  
 And time future contained in time past.  
 If all time is eternally present  
 All time is unredeemable.

(BN I, 171)

In five relatively short lines, the word “time” appears seven times, referring to at least four different meanings: time past, present, and future, and eternal time, marking out the full paradigm of the points in the temporal line in relation to one another (past, present, and future), or else the absence of temporality itself. For, as such, time eternal transforms temporality (time as the flux of lived reality) into a spatially imagined line of temporal continuity (past followed by present followed by future), presenting all time that consciousness is aware of as simultaneously (and statically) present. This spatial meaning of time is reinforced by the verb “contained” in the opening sentence, which is part of a predicative construction naming modes of presence of one kind of time in another: the present and the past *are present* in the future, *and* the future is *contained* (or present) in the past. The pronouns and conjunctions in these lines—“and,” “both,” and “all”—all reinforce the semantics of an all-containing presence; and the poem asserts it directly just a few lines below:

What might have been is an abstraction  
 Remaining a perpetual possibility  
 Only in a world of speculation.  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present.

(BN I, 171)

The theological vocabulary used to describe this all-containing “always present” marks it as the divine eternity, the absolute consciousness of God that apprehends all universe—all its existents, be they past, present, or future—in a constant contemplation. And yet simultaneously this absolute consciousness is described from a human point of view: the poem’s opening sentence qualifies the description by “perhaps.” That is, this all-containing consciousness is not actually given to the speaking viewpoint but only assumed as “a perpetual possibility,” and its world is “a world of speculation.” As to the actual point of view from which the poem speaks, the subsequent line specifies its spatiotemporal entity as “the memory.” Resembling the absolute consciousness in its capacity of memory through which time re-presents itself, the speaking consciousness is a spatiotemporal unity—a world, “our first world”—of all that is remembered, perceived, and assumed as unrealized possibility. The poem is about to reveal this world by inviting the reading eye wander around in a re-construction of its existents as they appear. Through the process of this re-constitution, the reader will re-live the emergence of those existents—in this and every other act of reading—as they appeared to the poet, in his turn re-living this experience as the memory he speaks. The mind is the common space, and the language the medium that makes this world re-appear again and again, regardless of its non-actuality to empirical perception: “My words echo / Thus, in your mind,” says the poem, just as “footfalls echo in the memory” of the speaking voice that we are about to live through.<sup>7</sup>

Raising the expectation of a narrative, the poem begins to balance out the stasis it has just asserted in its meditation on time with a promise and the commencement of the movement in which consciousness dis-covers the world that it faces—discovers, that is, by uncovering what its world is. The speculative eternity of the hypothetical abstraction and perpetual possibility here is the eternity of language as the system of concepts that mark for

us the existents of the world. It is, as such, an ideal, or a metaphysical system, the one in which all time is eternally present because all there is, has been or will be, can be thought and spoken about. The poem is about to redeem linguistic eternity from the sin of the speculative abstraction by manipulating its conceptual fixity and thus entangling the reading eye in the process of discovering that which the poem wants it to see. The stasis of all time eternally present in language *per se* will be disturbed by the poem's language, through its singular patterning which will direct the reading eye into actually experiencing time, not as eternally present knowledge (including memory and speculation on what might have been) but as the temporality of discovering that which is meant in the process of the meaning's appearance to the perceiving eye. In this event of discovering the meaning meant, the timeline that the opening lines of "Burnt Norton" imagined as the line in space needs to be followed in time for the event of meaning to actually take place.

The poem sets the stage for this event to happen by marking out the two virtual spaces in which its temporal development will take place: the space of the reading act, and the space of the memory of which the poem is about to tell.

What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose  
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
I do not know.

Other echoes  
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

(BN I, 171)

From the description of the all-containing "always present," the existential space that assumes the metaphysical and the ideal and yet confidently knows only that which is given, the poem jumps to the most specific of its virtual spaces, the memory, first: this space is a rose-garden, behind the door at the end of a passage leading to it. The quartet then steps back to reflect on the act of communicating this memory, the poet's saying the poem's words to the reader. The space of the event of meaning in this act is the (reader's) mind, where the (poet's) words "echo," in the same way as footfalls echo in his memory. The pronouns, through their deictic polysemy, weave the two planes together. The plural of the "we" includes the poet's companion in the walk he is remembering; but it also includes the reader, who identifies her reading eye with the poet's remembering eye in order to re-enact the remembered experience, through which she understands what the poem is saying. The same referential polysemy is characteristic of the imagery. The echo—of footfalls in the memory of the garden, and of words in the reader's mind—is on example. The roses—of the remembered garden, and those metonymically marked by the dead rose-leaves which the poem disturbs through its performance—is another. The poem distinguished the planes of its own signifying activity—the walk being remembered, the poet's remembering, and the reader's apprehension of the remembering—to gradually merge these planes into one significative act. In this act, the reading eye identifies with the eye remembering, while the memory itself is an act of re-living the experience remembered. For this merging to take place and for the signifying act to happen, the poem needs the reader's cooperation, and so it invites us into its "first world," setting out the rules according to which we are about to play:

Other echoes



Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?  
 Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
 Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
 Into our first world, shall we follow  
 The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.

(BN I, 171)

In order to live through the aesthetic experience the poem has to offer, we must “follow / The deception of the thrush,” in the way that the poem itself enacts for us by translating a bird’s cry, a sound that is in itself meaningless, into words. In the same way, we read black strokes on the page as letters and words and understand the meaning of the poem’s language, which involves, on another level, giving into the poem’s play of words and letting the reality they describe present itself to our mind’s eye. The text—the poem’s words, lines, and sentences—is the gate through which we enter the poem’s world, through the echoes of its words finding the inhabitants of its garden. We can enjoy these presences in the imagined-and-remembered garden of Burnt Norton only by virtue of being able to perceive them through the textual-linguistic mediation—the gates—of “Burnt Norton.”

Thus the significative planes marked by the poem so far keep their distinctiveness from one another and their mediatory significance even though they have to merge in order to convey the climactic vision of the roses in the pool. The scene of suspension is already set: the thrush has already invited both the reader and the poet—now merged into one perceiving and sense-giving viewpoint: the “we” marking the reading-remembering-watching eye—to “find *them*,” without identifying what “they” are but clearly pointing to an object to attend to. The subsequent sentence will name that object as the roses. But the name comes in the penultimate line of a sentence of seven lines, so that the reading eye experiences the same prolonged suspension of the object’s appearance in the poem’s language as the perceiving eye did, the process of its perception now (re-)constructed—or mimicked, and thus re-produced—through the syntax of the sentence:

There they were, dignified, invisible,  
 Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,  
 In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,  
 And the bird called, in response to  
 The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,  
 And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses  
 Had the look of flowers that are looked at.  
 There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.  
 So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,  
 Along the empty alley, into the box circle,  
 To look down into the drained pool.

(BN I, 171-172)

This re-enacted discovery of the roses begins by asserting the principal polarization that must be there for any discovery to happen: the polarization between the perceiving eye (here the equivalent of the subject) and the object it perceives. From the default position of the perceiving-and-signifying eye, the speaking voice gestures to the object for this multilayered eye to attend: “There they were.” This subject-object dependence, as the basic condition of meaningful perception, is reciprocal, and the poem asserts this reciprocity by closing this long sentence with a clause that rearticulates the subject-object polarization from the opposite pole, by stating the object’s dependence on the perceiver’s gaze: “the roses / Had the look of flowers that are looked at.” The subsequent line again reiterates their interdependence, in a simile of hospitality: “There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting;” “they” have to be accepted, just as we accept guests, in the world that is our

present (remembered or imagined) reality and, simultaneously, they accept our view of them as our eye recognizes that which it sees as roses.<sup>8</sup> The meaningful vision that is beginning to crystallize is not a fiction produced by artistically excited imagination but a reality grasped by aesthetic sensibility and re-enacted through mimicking the process in poetic language. The subject-object split is instated to keep its poles in a mutually defining unbreakable relation, the tension of which gives birth to the meaning that constitutes itself for the perceiving consciousness as the identity of the perceived object, the roses.

This long sentence, introducing the roses to the reading eye through suspending the reference for six lines, throws at us all there is in the imaginative-remembered perceptual field. In this attempt to name everything perceived at once, the poem makes visible the perceptual field itself, pointing to the multiple planes of mediation that shape the perceptual-and-signifying vision. “They” are invisible at first, moving by themselves (“without pressure”) over “the dead leaves” (the dead leaves of autumn in the garden, and the metaphorical rose-leaves in the bowl mentioned a few lines above), in the heat and air of the autumn when (as we now learn) the walk took place. The bird cries again, now in a response to the “unheard music hidden in the shrubbery of the garden”—or to a harmony not yet discovered, but known to be there and so open for discovery by “the unseen eyebeam” of the perceiving-and-signifying eye that pierces through (or crosses, to use the poem’s word: passes across, intersects) all it finds on the way to that which it is about to see. This harmony will arise in a dance of the reciprocal subject-object dependence, the multi-layered eye—“we”—and the roses—“they”—moving in “a formal pattern” until everything falls into the singularly meaningful entirety of a vision in which everything makes sense by taking its place in the field of perception.

The poem locates the vision first: the eye is looking “down into the drained pool. / Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged.” Yet what follows does not describe the empirical pool but re-constructs the experience of meaningful perception that once took place while looking at the pool. The perceptual, up to now an invisible plane of the signifying activity of the persona’s eye, suddenly appears in its full significance, somewhat paradoxically, through being disabled: the eye sees the empty pool filled with water out of sunlight at the moment when the excess of light actually blinds the eye. Out of this blindness, the vision will reconstruct itself as a constellation of perceptions already signified within the perceptual field—identified in self-sufficient complete images—to form meaningful continuities with the environment in which they appear.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.

(BN I, 172)

The sunlight here has the depth of the vessel that it fills in, as water would have if there were any in the dry pool at which the eye, blinded by the sun, is looking. Perception itself, by retaining all the perceiving eye has seen, turns the substance in the pool, light, into what it is supposed to be, water, and then the eye sees the surface of this water though consciousness knows this is not water the eye is looking at but sunlight. “The surface glittered out of heart of light” in a signifying move of perception, in a moment of suspended disbelief, forgetting the knowledge that there is no water in the pool—allowing the lotos, the flower of forgetfulness, to rise, “quietly, quietly”—and letting perception itself build its own meaningful unities. These unities arise in a fusion of the signifying structures with the perceptual ground they signify, the two planes complementing one another, supplying elements for a complete vision of meaningful reality to (re-)appear. What is known to be sunlight turns into water, and then this water is seen to have a reflective surface which, in its

turn, reflects the roses that are retained in this perceptual whole by memory's possession of percepts just grasped in the field of attention even though they are no longer present to the senses.

This is not an illusory unity, not a false reality, but a unity that arises in an unknowable, unpredictable and yet ongoing fusion of the signifying activity in which consciousness apprehends that which it perceives. The roses, and the entire vision, appear to the perceiving eye out of this contingent fusion; and for this contingency they are a presence of the ghostly kind, half-real: undeniably here at the moment of the immediate perception of them as this kind of existent, yet disappearing once the perceptual process has moved on. The vision emerges out of immediate perceptual associations, holds there for a moment, just long enough to be named, recognized, frozen in language as a complete meaningful form—"quietly, quietly"—and goes away with a change in the immediate environment: "Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty."

The movement closes with the poem's self-reflection after the world it has created has gone:

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,  
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.  
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.  
Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

(BN I, 172)

The bird reappears, now to bid a farewell, telling us to go, not into but from the world it has led us to, the garden being left full of yet unrealized living existents. The leaves of the garden, like the words of the poem, are "full of children, / Hidden excitedly, containing laughter" in an anticipation of the joy of discovery once they are found, as were the roses. Then the bird turns back on the experience we have just had and justifies our submission to the temptation of delimiting reality as we deceived ourselves by following the thrush and experiencing the world just pictured as if it was real: "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality," the thrush says. This cry points back, to the articulation in the poem's opening lines of the difference between the metaphysical omniscient consciousness of God and human consciousness, delimited by its finite capacity to hold no more than is given to it in every here-and-now of its spatiotemporal existence. This bird-cry also points forward, to the second movement of "Burnt Norton," where the poem names the dimensions of the existential givenness by locating its speaking voice "at the still point of the turning world" (BN II, 173) and by characterizing this point—still in itself and yet experiencing constant movement—as "neither flesh nor fleshless," for it is given to us as both at once. For "the enchainment of past and future"—in the indeterminable ways that the poem indicated in its opening lines and then played out in the vision of the roses—is "woven in the weakness of the changing body;" and it is this limitation that "protects mankind from heaven and damnation / Which flesh cannot endure." Within these limits, within the whole defined by the "white light still and moving" that has just been the source of a vision of meaningfulness, we can experience the epiphanic elevation into the bliss of an aesthetic insight. Thanks to the given fact that our existence in the world is always already surrounded by "a grace of sense" that the world itself is, we experience this bliss of meaningfulness, which "Burnt Norton" II re-plays as the Kantian elevation to the aesthetic sublime,<sup>9</sup>

*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood

In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
The resolution of its partial horror.

(BN II, 173)

Yet before this philosophical reflection on the pre-reflective experience of that which it names, the poem ends where it began. It steps back to look at, and reiterate, the scene of its own performance, the eternal metaphysical present of all time, where that which has been or is or will be stands next to the world of hypothetical possibilities—all this time present, however, to the assuming human point of view:

Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

(BN I, 172)

■  
In his critical exposition of Eliot's ambivalent relationship with Romanticism, George Bornstein (105-106) remarks that Eliot's scholars far too readily ascribe authority to Eliot's statements in his critical essays, assuming that they are based on theoretical rigor and present a truthful commentary on Eliot's own creative practice specifically and on literary tradition at large. Bornstein's own reading (94-162) shows Eliot's critical judgment of Romanticism partial: too often misinformed by secondary sources, rather fragmentary in Eliot's own readings of Romantic poetry, and predominantly expressive of Eliot's individual concerns rather than actually engaging with the Romantics. Eliot's poetry, meanwhile, uses Romanticist formal patterns and imagery, and raises similar existential concerns. Bornstein reads *Four Quartets* (154-158) as the most Romanticist of Eliot's poems without, however, denying its Eliotic individuality: the poem replays Romantic patterns and imagery on a variety of formal and semantic planes, and in every case it brings them to a non-Romantic end, manifesting Eliot's individual sense of the world informed by multiple other contexts.

It is a tenet of phenomenology that analytic reflection and pre-reflective experiential intuition are not quite the same thing, and the story Bornstein tells us about Eliot's relationship with Romanticism shows clearly that the eye of Eliot the critic does not exactly see the object appreciated by his poetic sensibility. And yet, phenomenology goes on to say, there are continuities between different modes and instances of experiencing the world, not least because it is the same world that we know and intuit, but also because the meaning of that which is perceived—intuitively or analytically—is constituted and expressed in the same language. Further, because our intuitions are in-formed by conceptual knowledge, as Eliot reflects in the lines of *Four Quartets* with which I began this essay, the distinction between analytic reflection and immediate intuition is not self-evident, and it is even more difficult to draw once all we have is a linguistic expression of analytic and intuitive perceptions. Eliot wrote his critical prose for specific occasions, originally as book reviews or as series of lectures, and it is punctuated by rhetorical traces of spontaneous response rather than characterized by the theoretical rigor expected from the genre (which Bornstein [106], among many others, justly notes in his reprimand to Eliot's critics). In contrast, a poem like *Four Quartets* is overwhelmingly philosophical and obsessively self-reflective, weaving a pattern of its own in utter disregard of generic boundaries. It seems that Eliot's vision relies directly on the two pillars that support the continuity of experience and enable communication of its meaning: shared language and the world it speaks. And then Eliot perhaps is not exactly using Romantic poetic patterns (or any other patterns, speaking on a more general scale) but speaks of the lived world in a linguistic pattern that makes sense for him in a similar way as it would for someone else, who happened to attend to similar human experience and articulate it in similar terms. Perhaps, to paraphrase "East Coker" (182), it is

because we keep recovering that which had already been discovered, and then lost and found and lost again to be re-discovered, that we can hear past voices, the words they speak still making sense to us despite historical distances far greater than that between Eliot and the Romantics. Yet even if this is the same kind of experience being re-discovered—"revived in the meaning" which is not "the experience of one life only / But of many generations," the meaning and the experience lurking "behind the assurance of recorded history" somewhere in the depths of "the primitive terror" (DS II, 187)—it is not really ahistorical, for we relive this meaning and experience every time in a different form. And then, the voices themselves are in the difference. The lived, unnamable experience they speak can only be lived through—like "music heard so deeply / That is not heard at all," but rather replayed through our own body, by letting it *be* "the music / While the music lasts" (DS V, 190). If only we can accept "A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing no less than everything)" (LG V 198): dare to submit to intuition—to that which remains as given after we have rejected everything we could—and let it lead us through the pattern of that meaning which has been, for that speaking voice, the experience in which the world made sense.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I adopt the conventional abbreviation for the parts of *Four Quartets*, indicating each of them by the first letters of their titles, and their movements by Roman numerals. All page references are to *The Complete Poems and Plays*.

<sup>2</sup> Kim's account—though published in Korean, a one page abstract available in English (44)—is an exception to this tendency, juxtaposing Eliot and Husserl directly.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson draws a division line between Husserl and Heidegger and dismisses Husserl for the incompatibility of his underlying premises with Eliot's views: Eliot would not accept the idealism implicit in the procedure of the transcendental reduction nor the ontological primacy of the transcendental Ego, in itself a metaphysical premise (41, 66). While I agree with Davidson on Eliot's rejection of idealism (with the reservation that in Eliot idealism comes back through the functioning of language in the conscious apprehension of reality, as I am about to show in my reading of *Four Quartets*), I would argue that the same applies to Husserl. By way of example rather than pointing to a definitive account, Dufrenne speaks for phenomenology exactly on the charges articulated by Davidson, showing its key notions to be anti-idealist by definition and hermeneutic in effect.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot mentions studying Husserl in a letter to Conrad Aiken for 25 July 1914, and then again in a report on his academic progress to Professor Woods on 5 October 1914. His annotated copy of Husserl is held in the London Library. Eliot enclosed the form of intention to submit his thesis with a letter to Woods dated 6 March 1916 (Eliot and Haughton 49, 65, 147).

<sup>5</sup> Olney (275-299) exposes this paradox of a closure that states openness in *Four Quartets*, tracing repetitions and expansions of the poem's imagery until they are tied up in the last twenty lines, without allowing for an interpretative conceptual summary of the poem's meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Riquelme (199-275 *passim*, esp. 203-207; 330-333) addresses the significance of Eliot's choice of Heraclitus for the epigraph and the implication of the untranslatability of his pre-Socratic thought.

<sup>7</sup> This notion of time—as the experience of temporality on the one hand, and as all reality eternally present to consciousness on the other, while language is the equivalent of the absolute consciousness of God and the medium in which the two interrelate in human experience—is steeped in hermeneutic thought, developed in detail in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Eliot, as a trained philosopher and a convert to the Anglo-Catholic faith at the age of forty two, would have known Augustine in depth, and parallels between Augustine and Eliot's are worth special attention. Directly, Eliot refers to *Confessions* in the Notes to *The Waste Land* twice (*Complete Poems and Plays* 79) and, in a quite personal and rather playful manner, in a letter to Geoffrey Faber dated 18 August 1925 (Eliot and Haughton 721).

<sup>8</sup> Bush (190-195) reads this passage in two ways: parallels with *The Family Reunion* make Bush assume that the pronoun “they” refers to the ghosts of the persona’s past, whom the persona sees reflected in the pool; but his close immanent reading of the same lines shows that their linguistic patterning makes the reading eye stop on the roses and, once it does, never withdraw attention from them. The roses, the ghosts and the motifs around them have been traced to sources beyond Eliot’s *oeuvre*, such as John Donne, Lewis Carroll (Smith 260), Rudyard Kipling and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Gardner 39-41), most of these references provided by Eliot himself.

<sup>9</sup> Habib (97-124) gives an admirably precise analytic exposition of Kant’s significance in Eliot’s thinking, as evidenced in Eliot’s manuscripts on Kant’s metaphysics, as well as indirectly, through sources that built on Kantian assumptions and were relevant to Eliot in their own right. This exposition foregrounds the network of assumptions about experienced and metaphysical reality, the relationship between theology and philosophy after their historical divorce, and the role of conceptual frames (including language) in these relationships. In this context, the German ‘*Erhebung*’ in *Four Quartets* appears as Eliot’s inscription of Kant into the worldview that this poem proclaims, choosing a verbal form of *das Erhabene* to insist on the temporal, fluctuating aspect of experiencing the Kantian Sublime that Eliot formulates here in his own poetic terms, over against the stasis that Kant describes as aesthetic experience.

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